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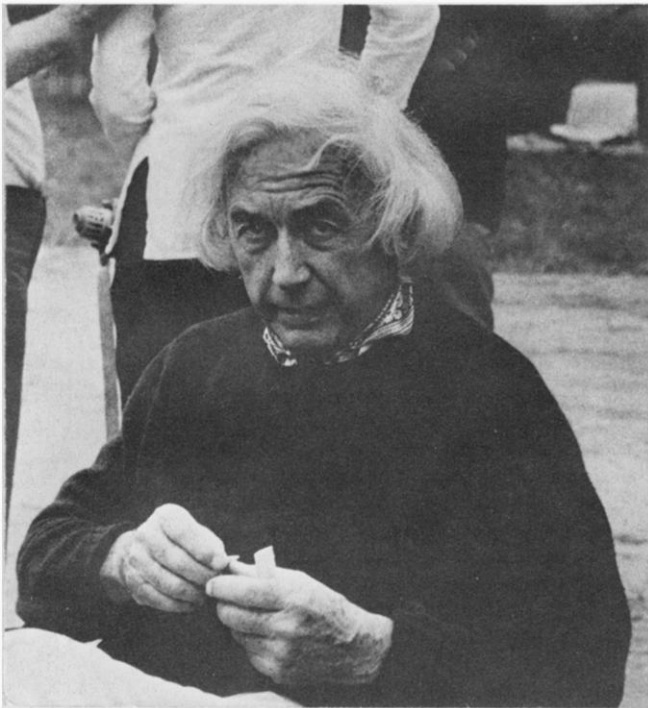
MICHAEL DEMPSEY

Despair Abounding: The Recent Films of Robert Bresson

Spare, austere, restrained, severe, bleak—words like these typically appear in every description of Robert Bresson's films. Certainly, they all apply. No film-maker has ever denied us more intransigently so much of what we tend to regard—rightly—as the pleasures of cinema: all those “forbidden” delights of acting, overtly beautiful imagery, styles of editing and camerawork and art direction and scoring and special effects which “vulgarly” manipulate us—all of them bastardized tricks of “filmed theater,” which is what the very term “cinema” means to him. His kind of film-making he calls *le cinématographe*;¹ some of its components are monotone line readings, automatic gestures, and

untrained “models” instead of actors and their false expressiveness; flat rather than eye-catching imagery; elliptical editing which compresses emotional peaks and often omits even climactic scenes; chaste camerawork which hides faces as often as it reveals them or holds on spaces after characters have vacated them. Whether you call it “spiritual style,” like Susan Sontag, “transcendental style,” like Paul Schrader, or Bresson's “universe,” like Amedée Ayfre, it is a style which portrays life as Calvary, in which mortification is endless and all surfaces, human or material, obdurately resist yielding “insight” or “meaning.”

But the hill of Calvary leads finally to eternal ecstasy in the next world for those who are able to climb it. Despite the forbidding chill which any account of Bresson's methods may suggest to people who do not know any of his work, he is actually a fountainhead of faith in the reality of this eternal ecstasy. He marshals his expressive resources toward final shots which seek to draw this same faith from us. The glowing cross and the voice intoning, “All is grace,” at the end of *The Diary of a Country Priest* testify to Bresson's certainty that the spirit of the impoverished, cancer-ridden young cleric has flown from its prison of flesh and earth to everlasting fulfillment in the bosom of God's love. The last image in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*—the charred stake on which her body has been burnt to ashes—evokes the immortality and the liberation of her soul. In *Les Anges du Peché*, Thérèse, murderess hiding in a convent as a postulant, responds to the death of a saintly young nun who tried to help her by reaching out to accept the handcuffs which the police snap onto her wrists. In *Pickpocket*, Michel must be jailed before he can learn what freedom really is. Fontane's flight from another prison, in



◀ Bresson shooting LANCELOT OF THE LAKE

ROBERT BRESSON

A Man Escaped, emblemizes the soul's submission to God and his grace, which inspire him to risk his carefully plotted escape by taking a last-minute cellmate, Jost, along with him. Bresson has been the most optimistic of film-makers; every facet of his fastidiously cultivated technique has striven to show the way to Paradise.

But all this has changed drastically during the past dozen years. During that time, Bresson made his first color films—*Une Femme Douce* (1969), *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971), *Lancelot of the Lake* (1974), and *The Devil Probably* (1977)—and they all have something else in common: the waning of transcendence and the rise of despair. The importance of this change in tone for a Catholic film-maker cannot be overstated. In the past, as Marvin Zeman has pointed out,² Bresson has often seemed interested in finding exceptions to Catholicism's official condemnation of suicide, which continues to be a major preoccupation in the color films. But justifying despair is an even more extreme step. To a Catholic, despair is by definition an "unforgivable" sin because it denies that even God has the power to save one's soul—which amounts to a denial of God's very existence, at least as a Catholic defines God. Yet despair suffuses Bresson's recent work, without the compensating imagery of salvation which completes his earlier films.

Instead, the color films portray the withering away of transcendental hope. One example is especially pointed. In *Une Femme Douce*, a young wife caught in a destructive marriage kills herself rather than accept her suffering any longer or cling to hope for earthly relief. Yet Bresson offers no sign that, after death, she finds heavenly relief. In the story by Dostoyevsky on which he based the film, the tormented woman leaps to her death clutching an icon, which seems to reveal her faith that God will forgive her for the sin of taking her life. This image seems made for Bresson, yet he rejects it; his "gentle creature" has a crucifix, but she leaves it behind. Each of the color films has an equivalent conclusion; each conveys little or no sense of an afterlife; each implies a God who is either silent, indifferent, or non-existent.

All of this puts a distressing new construction on a major element in Bresson's work: the religious paradox of co-existing predestination and



UNE FEMME DOUCE

free will. Either a mystery or an absurdity, depending on your beliefs, this conundrum proposes that God, being all-knowing, knows every detail of every human life in advance, in particular whether a given person will be saved or damned; yet, at the same time, human beings have free wills, choose their destinies. To Catholics and some other religionists, what reconciles the halves of this flagrant intellectual contradiction is "grace," that enigmatic soul-illumination through which God indicates his will and inspires—but does not force—us to submit to it. According to theologians, such grace is strictly *unwilled*, *unbidden*, a divine gift; we can do nothing to merit it, though we can refuse it. By accepting it, we accept our predestined fate, God's will for us, yielding superficial liberty to gain profound liberty. Thérèse reaching for the handcuffs; Michel touching Jeanne through the wire mesh of his cell and murmuring, "What a strange road I have taken to reach you"; Fontane discovering, after he decides not to kill Jost, that he could not have escaped without Jost's help—these are some of Bresson's past embodiments of this reconciliation between predestination and free will. To Bresson, as Zeman puts it, "Life consists of finding out to what we have been predestined"; or, as Paul Schrader states, "The drama is whether or not the character (or the viewer) will accept his predestined fate . . . Man must *choose* that which has been predestined."³

Which is fine, if you happened to be predestined to salvation. But this is a theological Gordian knot; for, if we are predestined to a given fate, then we are equally predestined to choose or reject said fate. Not that logic necessarily matters to believers in this creed. When I was a Catholic seminarian, during high school and early college,

even the most intelligent priest-instructors avoided or evaded discussing the matter. There is simply no way to deal with it rationally. You either believe that, through grace, Fontane freely accepts rather than murders Jost, or you believe that this choice is also predestined, hence no real choice at all—which means that you reject the entire paradox and with it Catholicism and perhaps God as well.

While working on *The Devil Probably*, Bresson told Schrader, "I think there is predestination in our lives. Certainly. It can't be otherwise."⁴ But without an accompanying sense of transcendence, of "grace abounding," belief in predestination renders life not the hill of Calvary but the mountain of Sisyphus. Both inflict long, intense agony; but the first promises ultimate salvation, while the second offers only ultimate futility. In one respect, Bresson's statement is ambiguous; he does not say *how much* predestination there is in our lives. But whether he believes its role to be partial or total (and how could it be partial?), the change in his manner of dealing with it in his films has been grim. The black-and-white films depict predestination to suffering which culminates in glorious transfiguration. The color films depict predestination to the same suffering only to have it end in extinction.

UNE FEMME DOUCE—Scenes from a Marriage as Hell

This new predestination without salvation shapes the very structure of *Une Femme Douce*. Following Dostoyevsky, Bresson shows the heroine's suicide at both the beginning and the end of the film, so that there is never any doubt about her fate. In place of Dostoyevsky's icon and the film's crucifix, Bresson grants her a secular token of elegy: the white shawl which floats in the air after her body has struck the earth. We wonder if Bresson will show something more the second time we witness the suicide. He does—but it proves to be an image of horror.

Une Femme Douce is such a baleful film because, in the absence of a transcendental dimension, it must finally make the pain of the heroine and the pawnbroker she marries utterly useless. Between the suicide scenes, Bresson intercuts "present" scenes of the distraught husband pacing around the wife's laid-out corpse and "past"

scenes from their relationship. Desperately talking to himself or their maid, he struggles to fathom the tragedy and his own role in it. Not that the answer to the central question—why did she kill herself?—is any mystery. We quickly discover that poverty, not love, drove her into a soul-destroying union with a cold, money-grubbing, stiflingly possessive man who snuffed out all pleasure and hope for her. But if this said everything, *Une Femme Douce* would be simply a remake of *Gaslight*. Within this level of obviousness is something else that is far from obvious: what *precisely* pushes the wife over the brink? When she kills herself, the marriage seems to be improving. Her husband has blamed himself for all their misery and sworn to make their future bright. This is what haunts him as he paces around her corpse. But her death refuses to yield comforting insight, to him or to us.

This mismatch quickly degenerates into brutal psychological warfare, which takes the form of either caustic words—he attacking her for "overpaying" pawnshop customers, she ordering him to stop dominating her with money—or killing silence. The marriage grows to be so lethal that we look for an excuse to question the film's depiction of it. Unfortunately, Bresson's adaptation has provided one. The notion that the wife (she and the husband are nameless in the film) truly has no other option except pawning herself to this crabbed man is a lot harder to accept in modern Paris than in Dostoyevsky's Russia. The mumbo-jumbo surrounding her "sinister" relatives, who never appear but supposedly help force her into the marriage, is just as clumsy. These elements create confusion at the heart of the film. Nearly everything in it pushes us to blame the husband for the whole disaster. Yet the wife's unconvincing motivation suggests, perhaps unintentionally, that the marriage is an act of masochism for her. Yet we cannot tell where this masochism comes from because, as always, Dominique Sanda, who plays the wife, suggests anything but a "gentle creature." Even in this, her first film, she seems much too vibrant and self-reliant to let Guy Frangin's emotionally parched stiffneck shackle her.

Yet this blurriness certainly adds to the atmosphere of opaque incomprehension which seeps through the film like slow poison. Bresson's style undermines even their wedding night, one of their

few happy experiences, by pointing up the groom's uneasiness with the bride's mischievous sensuality. Thereafter, sexual passion still flows between them—as Bresson himself has said, the film's color is keyed to the warm blush of Sanda's skin—but it is rising hatred which fuels the passion, except for some tender moments which she initiates. After one steely encounter, the husband narrates: "That night we made love as usual, but her attitude had changed, and I only wanted to possess her body." Bresson's most grisly touch is running this line over an image of her cadaver as he circles it in anguish. The film builds to one creepily sadistic episode in particular. After an especially sharp quarrel between them, the husband carefully leaves out a pistol before going to bed alone. The next morning, he feigns sleep while, just as he planned, she finds the gun, clicks the hammer, and all but presses the muzzle against his face. This is the closest that Bresson has ever come to conventional suspense; the moment is frightening even though we know that she will not pull the trigger. Afterwards, he is able to play cunningly on both her shame at nearly committing murder and her uncertainty about whether or not he was really asleep.

This part of the film does suggest *Gaslight*; there is no doubt that, in episodes like this, he is

actively working to destroy her psychologically and emotionally. In their new book *Self and Cinema: A Transformatist Perspective*, Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder declare that everything in the film, including the elements which appear to condemn him (even when he condemns himself, as he often does through his narration), actually reveals him as an endlessly devious sado-masochist totally intent on absolutely nothing besides destroying the wife's sense of her own experience in order to subjugate her ever more profoundly.⁵

This approach to the film yields a lot of fresh insights, but I feel that it also misses the deepest source of its despair. Point-of-view in *Une Femme Douce* seems thoroughly confused. Commentators routinely state that the body of the film consists of flashbacks, yet Bresson has stated firmly that "there are no flashbacks in the film."⁶ Unless he is simply being perverse, this must mean that, as far as he is concerned, the images of the marriage are *not* being filtered through the husband's subjectivity; instead, they are elliptical but objective pictures of what happened between the couple. Yet the film's structure encourages us to treat them as his distorted, undependable memories, as their *entirely verbal* equivalents certainly are in the Dostoyevsky story. Which possibility is true

Guy Frangin
and
Dominique
Sanda in
UNE FEMME
DOUCE



is not just an academic matter. The film's narration unquestionably belongs to the husband, but it is not the entire film the way the narration in the story is the entire story. The imagery of the film is what the story lacks, and that imagery is too distinctively Bressonian to express anyone else's subjectivity, including the husband's. For proof, look at the wife's suicide and her last moments alone in her bedroom; stylistically, they are identical to the rest of the film, even though the husband did not witness them. Why is this important? Because it indicates that, without diminishing the husband's responsibility for the wife's death in the slightest, Bresson is not presenting him as an endlessly devious sado-masochist *only*. If he were, the film would be just a rarefied good girl-bad guy melodrama.

Bresson is after something larger: the fundamental impurity, corruption, and inadequacy of all our motives and acts. A small but key example comes early, when the (future) wife pawns her crucifix. As the pawnbroker weighs it and offers more money than it is worth, he suddenly describes himself with a line from Goethe's *Faust*: "I am part of that force which does evil." Now he may well be, as Houston and Kinder maintain, flaunting his education. But he is also sincerely baring the full acrid depth of his bitter self-loathing, which he longs to escape. When she smiles kindly and adds, "Or good," to the quotation, he feels a sudden freshet of hope for deliverance from his repressed, avaricious nature through union with her (virtually the same deliverance that Jeanne offers Michel in *Pickpocket*). Yet the flaws in his nature are too deep-rooted; he cannot stop viewing her *simultaneously* as an object to be possessed. In *Une Femme Douce*, such contradictions merge inextricably; he is *both* a cruel manipulator and "a husband pining for love," and she is a willing victim (whether or not Bresson intended this) *as well as* a brutalized innocent.

This byzantine confusion of motives brings about the final tragedy. The husband flings himself at the wife's feet, extravagantly begging for her forgiveness. She reacts with confusion and distrust, just as we do. Is he sincere? Or is this just another power game? When he says, in the present, "What I felt was not pity for her; I was full of enthusiasm; no one can understand my

emotion," we see a tear rolling down his cheek, in the past, just before he throws himself at her this way. But can we trust that tear? Why did he feel enthusiastic? Because he had hit upon a clever new way to control her? Or because he truly envisioned future happiness for them both? Why can (note the change of tense) no one—including us, presumably—understand his emotions? Because they are truly ineffable, or because he is rationalizing his perfidy? When she cries, "And I thought you would desert me," is she glad or unhappy? What could break through such an impasse? Only grace, only a leap of faith. Had the old Bresson made this film, grace might have entered precisely at this point—or shortly thereafter, when the husband abruptly embraces the wife "like a madman." Then *Une Femme Douce* might have been like Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*, in which a similar leap of faith suddenly dissolves the bitter estrangement of another married couple. But, without this possibility, the couple in *Une Femme Douce* cannot reach one another. Even if his change of heart is totally sincere, it comes too late; she has been too severely damaged for such belated rescue. And during his sudden embrace, to him the act of a tender lover, we see what he cannot see: the distant, responseless pallor of her face as he holds her. Despair and tragedy are inevitable.

The ambiguity surrounding the marriage also envelops her suicide. Seconds before jumping, she smiles at her mirrored image. What does this signify? We can guess, but we will never know. And what are the effects of her death? She escapes unbearable pain, achieves "freedom" and "autonomy" (if such terms have any useful meaning in this context). Yet, as Charles Thomas Samuels told Bresson, "Her suicide is a hostile act, dooming him to an eternity of grief unmitigated by understanding" (just as killing him would have doomed her). To which Bresson replied, "Of course."⁶ He underlines this by having the maid look in uneasily moments before the wife jumps and then observe the death leap too late to prevent it. We may imagine that the maid, whom we have barely noticed throughout the film, will suffer as much as the husband will. The wife obviously never considered this or did not care.

Compare her suicide to the one that climaxes *Mouchette*, which is a spiritual victory, as Bresson

treats it. When the mistreated young rural girl splashes offscreen into a pond to drown, he holds his camera on the rings which ripple serenely across the water's surface and adds coolly lovely notes from Monteverdi's "Magnificat" to the sound track—signs that God has mercifully embraced her soul. But *Une Femme Douce* ends with the husband lifting the wife's head as she lies in her coffin, imploring her to open her eyes for just one second, and then—dreadfully—the lid sliding onto the coffin and a hand bolting it down. No comforting music, no icon of redemption, no "freedom" or "autonomy"—just a cadaver locked inside a box to rot. Unlike *Mouchette*, which suggests that its heroine is better off dead, *Une Femme Douce* suggests that its "gentle creature" would have been better off if she had never been born.

LANCELOT OF THE LAKE—The Dark Void

A nightmare of the quick and the dead in a dimming cosmos, *Lancelot of the Lake* immediately violates one of Bresson's primary maxims about film-making. Explaining to Samuels why he used the floating shawl in *Une Femme Douce*, he said, "since I try never to show anything that is impossible, and since, of course, Dominique Sanda does not actually hit the ground . . ." Yet *Lancelot* opens with a gory decapitation in close-up. As the knights continue fighting, their helmets hiding their faces, the neck of the beheaded knight gushes a geyser of blood onto the ground. Later, the tournament at Escalot features crashing combat with heavy lances, and the climax returns to the forest of the opening scene for more slaughter. The sound track reverberates, tersely and harshly, with the clashing of broadswords, the splintering crunch of spears against shields, the penetrating thuds of arrows piercing armor or stabbing horses. In *Lancelot of the Lake*, Bresson's style shows a new crispness, a gnashing, angry snap; even his customary narrative elisions feel unusually draconian. This tougher tone, this willingness to bend old rules, seems to reflect a deepening desperation.

Unlike Bresson's other color films, *Lancelot* returns to a lost world of courtly ideals and Catholic dominance, only to discover the same malaise there which the color films isolate in contemporary society. After sketching the tattered end of the disastrous quest for the Holy Grail, the film takes

King Arthur and the chastened Knights of the Round Table back to Camelot. During the quest, several knights died; others plundered and pillaged aimlessly—Bresson gives us brief shots of riders wrecking a chapel and a sword sweeping an altar clean. Mournfully surveying the chamber of the Round Table, Arthur resolves to close it permanently, partly out of fear that he and the survivors have outraged God. But, instead of regrouping, the remaining knights form rival factions, one gathering around their greatest hero, Lancelot, who they hope will rally them to renewed glory, the other supporting Mordred, who opposed the quest and now plots against Lancelot.

Grimly, Bresson rips away nearly every vestige of romance, pomp, and magic from the material. As Jonathan Rosenbaum has mentioned, *Lancelot of the Lake* contains no trace of the Lady in the Lake, Merlin's sorcery, or Merlin himself;⁷ he might have added, no Excalibur, no "lily maid of Astolat," no "Gaily bedight, a gallant knight, in sunshine and in shadow . . ." We seldom see Bresson's knights out of their armor, which is always creaking and clattering. At first, this touch gets laughs; each time the knights walk or move, they sound like garbage cans banging together. Yet as we grow used to this noise, the armor takes on sinister qualities. Encased inside it, the knights look insectoid, like a strain of humanoid beetles walking the earth following some cataclysm. Helmets mask and unveil already opaque faces according to intricate rhythms; during one argument, knights raise their visors to speak, then lower them after each line. This use of armor underlies the primitivism and the savagery lurking beneath the facade of knighthood—which also emerges from Bresson's references to superstition's infiltration of Catholicism. Spiritually if not historically, *Lancelot of the Lake* parallels *Robin and Marian*; both limn the decay of knightly honor and religious idealism, sending mythic heroes to wintry deaths.

In his color films, Bresson's religion-rooted style mirrors this sense of lost faith. Like the Catholicism which nurtured it, this style is based upon suppression—of the aforementioned "forbidden" elements of film. But as the power of religious faith has blurred and faded in his work, many of these "forbidden" elements have crept into it: the modern Parisian settings and details of *Une*

Femme Douce, *Four Nights of a Dreamer*, and *The Devil Probably*; the overtly "beautiful" imagery of *Four Nights*; the graphic violence, action, and spectacle in *Lancelot of the Lake*; the uses of nudity and more glamorously attractive "models" (especially women) in all four. In *Lancelot* above all, we feel the conflict between this new interest in the "forbidden," both theological and cinematic, and Bresson's restraining formalism—a conflict which parallels Lancelot's guilt over his attraction to Guinevere. *Lancelot of the Lake* often threatens to burst the steely bonds of Bresson's style and become a Sam Peckinpah film. The resulting tension makes it, purely as a piece of direction, the most exciting of the color films.

Bresson's handling of the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere reflects this as much as his treatment of the violence does. Unable to regain his bearings after the quest, Lancelot feels torn apart by conflicting loyalties—to God as Lord, to Arthur as Liege, to Guinevere as lover. By renouncing the last, his most secular oath, and reverting to religious asceticism, he blindly hopes to regenerate himself and the Round Table. Bresson uses the stoic, chiseled face of Luc Simon for its craggy aura of angst; his Lancelot cannot hope to make an absolutely correct decision. When he tries, his confusion only grows. After resolving to join Guinevere instead of the tournament at Escalot, he changes his mind and competes anonymously, winning so brilliantly that the onlookers guess his identity and cheer this restoration of his

knightly prowess. But the tournament's brutality only deepens his revulsion against the tooth-and-claw viciousness which the knightly code gilds with high-flown talk of honor and God.

The significance of Guinevere (Laura Duke Condominas) is clear the instant we first see her: she is the only character who never wears armor, who is visible from head to foot all the time. So it is she who carries out the film's contrast between the hard imperviousness of armor and the soft vulnerability of skin. But this statement alone is too abstract; her allure is openly sexual. Laura Duke Condominas seems physically slight, in stature a girl-queen, especially when juxtaposed to the armored knights. But Bresson takes full advantage of her intent gaze and vibrant voice. Whenever she approaches the metal-sheathed Lancelot, he is plainly mesmerized, and so are we; such proximity is tender, comical, and kinky all rolled into one. In another scene, the camera starts on her calves as she stands nude in a wooden tub while attendants bathe her, then rises past her thighs, buttocks, and gleaming back. The lush image contradicts the lives of the knights: bare flesh so enticing that we want to stroke it ourselves, in a world of metal skin; utter defenselessness where dangerous weapons and plots are the norm. Even when the shot ends in close-up on the back of her head as she gazes narcissistically into a small hand mirror, Guinevere looks even more ravishing.

But she is not just a sensual delight; she explicitly challenges Lancelot's knightly code. She condemns his attempt to use the will of God as an excuse to renounce their love. To her, this obsession with serving God ascetically is just masculine vanity, which would possess a divine token like the Grail, or even God himself, like a trophy. Refusing to agree that the disasters which have befallen the knights are God's punishment for their adultery, she intones: "I am the one who was created to help you, the one who will cross this dark void with you," and there is no doubt that she speaks for Bresson. The spare, eloquent image of her lit window against the darkness of the night and the castle establish her as the film's prime beacon of human light: "Our only woman, our sun," the knights call her. Amid God's silence or absence, she assumes the role of grace.

But what she represents cannot save Lancelot



◀ Guinevere (Laura Duke Condominas)

ROBERT BRESSON

or anyone else from chaos. When he rescues her from imprisonment, he only precipitates more carnage, as his forces war against Arthur's loyalists. Bresson elides the main battle, concentrating on its aftermath, particularly the pointless death of Lancelot's staunchest supporter, Gawain, whom Lancelot himself, failing to recognize him in his armor, struck down by mistake. At the height of this new catastrophe, it is Guinevere, not Lancelot, who sacrifices their love by returning to Arthur in order to end the war. As they walk together toward Arthur's camp, the camera catches her bare hand holding his mailed wrist—a melancholy completion of the film's central motif—and then, as they separate for the last time, her palm as it brushes fleetingly over his uncovered hand. After this moment, the final part of *Lancelot* plunges even deeper into despair than *Une Femme Douce* does. Mordred rebels against Arthur, and Lancelot sets aside his grievances to defend the king. But right away we lose all sense of who is fighting whom; from this point onward, we do not so much as



Lancelot and Guinevere

glimpse a human face again. Bresson recapitulates the massacre in the forest from his opening scene, but with a ghastly addition: bowmen raking the knights from the trees, rendering them nakedly vulnerable despite their armor. We sense that one of those pivotal instants in history has dawned, when warfare escalates to previously unimagined levels of destruction—like the advent of new atomic rockets in *The Devil Probably*. At such a moment,



values like fealty to lover or sovereign or even divinity seem like tissue paper defenses against annihilation.

The old Bresson would still have found a way to pass Lancelot into paradise; now that doorway is sealed. Yielding Guinevere, standing by religion, defending his liege—none of these sacrificial acts assuages his grief or regenerates his sense of divine providence. His is the most chilling death in all of Bresson's films. We see a plainly dying knight, identity hidden by his armor, stumbling to a clearing in the forest, where a pile of other knights, all dead, lies like a scrap heap. From inside his armor, one lofting word finally reveals him: "Guinevere!" He topples onto the fallen knights, the metal wreckage clanking once. Bresson cuts to a silent shot of a gliding bird, then returns to Lancelot as he sags in death, his armor clanking one last time. Perhaps Bresson would maintain that this bird, like the shawl in *Une Femme Douce*, evokes the presence of God. But what we remember are the piled-up knights, their armor now their coffins, and that flat, dull clank. In *Lancelot of the Lake*, it is not grace but death which abounds—death with no life beyond it.

THE DEVIL PROBABLY—Worldwide Suicide

The Devil Probably might have arisen from the concluding clank of *Lancelot of the Lake*. Returning to the modern world, Bresson has made his *Salò*, a shriek of desolation at what he views as humanity's lemming-like rush to extinction. Charles, a young student, drifts toward suicide because he cannot bear the manifold social, political, and ecological horrors of our world. His friends try urgently to dissuade him. Two women, Alberte and Edwige, take turns living with him, offering devotion and love-making. Institutions and activists present more rational-based reasons for staying alive: revolutionaries at a cellar rally; liberal and conservative Catholics debating "Whither the Church?"; a psychoanalyst who minimizes Charles's agony as mere neurosis; another companion, Michel, whose crusading study group monitors ecological rape and promotes science as the key to solving the world's problems. The film, then, covers the pleasures, the dreams, the hopes which keep us believing, against the worst evidence to the contrary, that it is better to

go on living than to die. But they are not enough for Charles. "I see too clearly," he tells the shrink. "That is my dilemma." So he hires a junkie, Valentine, to shoot him dead in a cemetery. It is not surprising to learn that *The Devil Probably* was nearly banned in France for "inciting the young to suicide" (and why the young only?); the film is a virtual brief for suicide.

Once again, Bresson has admitted "forbidden" elements into his work, this time direct social comment and footage of ecological disasters, screened by Michel's study group, which appears to have been shot by others. Bresson defines social evil in terms of ecological callousness, represented by these images of fume-spewing factories and jets, poisoned animals and trees, mounds of garbage and trashed car hulks, a grounded tanker polluting the ocean, nuclear explosions, the baby seal hunt in Newfoundland, brain-damaged children of the Minamata mercury pollution. Of the latter, Michel declares, "These pictures can't be shown enough." Bresson heightens the impact of the footage (a first for him, except for short clips from *Benjamin* in *Une Femme Douce*), putting his own stamp on it, through terse editing and some augmented sound effects, like the smash of the club which slaughters one baby seal. It is startling to find Bresson, so insistent on "abstraction" and "timelessness" in his films, slamming home this topical indictment so bluntly, like a Trappist switching robes with a hanging judge.

Charles and Bresson both despair of any possible cure for this monstrous decadence. The cellar revolutionaries sloganize stupidly for terrorism ("Je proclame la destruction," one shouts repeatedly); the film caricatures and curtly dismisses politics as part of the problem. Religion gets a longer hearing but the same verdict. While the rival Catholics wrangle, in a manner straight from the John XXIII-Second Vatican Council era, Bresson highlights the cavernous emptiness of the gothic cathedral where they meet and the discordant bellows of its pipe organ as a repairman tinkers with it. Later, Charles spends a night there, playing Monteverdi choral music and contemplating the cathedral's grandeur. Earlier, he had quoted Victor Hugo on how God vanishes from a church the instant priests enter it. No priests appear now, but neither does any heavenly illumination, any

grace. Psychoanalysis is equally impotent; Charles's shrink offers Freudian clichés and smug preachments about "adjusting" to society. Bresson vents his well-known disdain for "psychology (of the kind which discovers only what it can explain)"¹ on this sub-Mazursky cartoon. But the scene does yield Charles's fiercest outburst, when he opens an ad-laden magazine and cries, "Losing life, I would lose . . ." and then reads off all the consumer goods so rapidly that my pen could not keep up with his passionate torrent. About all Charles has left is some minimal belief in God, who will, he states, not punish him for committing suicide, for not understanding what no one can understand. Yet he has nightmares of being beaten even after death. And again, Bresson renders a suicide worthless in any larger sense. After the opening titles, he cuts to two successive editions of a newspaper, the first claiming that Charles killed himself, the second changing him to a murder victim. The ending explains this discrepancy. After shooting Charles, Valentine places the gun in his hand to make his death look self-inflicted—but forgets to wipe away his own fingerprints. Thus, as far as anyone will ever know (unless his friends say otherwise), this Charles person died not to protest the contamination of the world but because he met a homicidal addict. Even the film's title, which provides a convenient scapegoat, is ironic. The sense of futility is total.

Obviously, all this is intolerable. So we seek to discredit Charles, as we do the portrait of marital hell in *Une Femme Douce*. We fix on the film's unfair treatment of political action or the "sub-Mazursky" shrink. Or we deny that the film is "really" about all this horror. François Truffaut assures us:

Ecology, the New Church, drugs, psychoanalysis, suicide? No, these are not the subjects of *The Devil Probably*. Its real subjects are the intelligence, the seriousness, and the beauty of the young people of today, and particularly of these four of whom one could say—quoting Cocteau's remark in *Les Enfants Terribles*—"the air they breathe is lighter than air."²

Louis Malle (a former assistant to Bresson) tells of sitting next to a note-taking critic during the 1977 New York Film Festival:

And I imagined that he had a very misconceived idea of what the film was about . . . probably thinking he should talk about ecology, about the old man's vision of the world—everything that has to do with what Bresson worries about a

lot, but which for me is very naive, very clichéd. What is fascinating about the film is that it looks like Pascal—it's all about grace, about people with a gift for life, which is something divine . . . it's a completely mystical film. When he deals with the news, it's foolish. And I'm sure Bresson would agree with me. In an interview in a French newspaper, he said: "You know, it's not a statement about the new generation—actually I was projecting some of my own memories about my childhood."

In one respect, these statements are cop-outs; they implicitly dismiss Charles as a misfit, an over-reactor, a whiner, a defeatist. Charles is none of these things, yet the impulse to dismiss his vision is justified. What barely makes *The Devil Probably* watchable is Bresson's awareness of this. Just as Luis Buñuel's lack of overt pity for his characters provokes us to pity them (according to André Bazin), so also does the very relentlessness of Bresson's case for suicide goad us to dispute it. And, as Truffaut and Malle discern, despite Charles's airtight logic, he does not have all the arguments on his side.

The young people in the film are indeed fascinatingly beautiful, both physically and spiritually. As Alberte and Edwige, Tina Irissari and Laetitia Carcano suggest light and dark ministering angels, and Henri de Maublanc imparts a handsome gravity to Michel. As for Charles, Antoine Monnier gives him a faintly androgynous allure; he suggests a lark shot out of the sky tracing a lyric curve down to earth. Quoting Leonardo da Vinci, Bresson has urged us to think above all about the surfaces of artworks.³ In *The Devil Probably* the surfaces are, along with the horrors, these examples of human loveliness, which use physical beauty to highlight spiritual beauty—Charles's probing honesty, the loyalty of his friends to him. At times, the very ineffectiveness of their efforts to "save" him is comically touching, as when Alberte becomes con-



Antoine Monnier and Tina Irissari: ►
THE DEVIL PROBABLY

vinced that a shrink is all he needs or when she sobs out her hope that he will regain his zest for living, while he pats her mechanically. After struggling in vain to out-argue Charles, Michel finally snaps in exasperation, "I want to live even if it's illogical." Bresson parallels his steadfastness toward Alberte with hers toward Charles, when she leaves him to live with Charles. Bresson gives special emphasis to their reconciliation: as they walk toward traffic, she suddenly says, "Embrasse-moi," and the camera holds on their embrace for ten seconds or more. It is "illogical" to pose such flimsy intimacy as a counterweight to evil abounding, which is why Bresson does it.

He also repeats his strategy in *Une Femme Douce* by making the precise catalyst for Charles's suicide uncertain. Why, instead of killing himself directly, does he pay Valentine to do it? This ambiguity is another frail barrier against total nihilism. Early in the film, Alberte and Michel read in Charles's diary: "When will I kill myself, if not now?" But Charles does not kill himself "now." Later, he sits by the Seine at night, examining a bullet before firing it into his brain. But he fires it into the river instead. The idea of paying Valentine to kill him comes, ironically, from the shrink, who tells how ancient Romans contemplating suicide sometimes hired their own executioners. There is something ceremonial about the way that Charles and Valentine walk to the cemetery, as though completing the Stations of the Cross. Does this appeal to Charles? Would dying *alone* be too unbearable? Has he hired Valentine in order to protect the integrity of his logic against last-second, "illogical" fear? We can only wonder. Right up to the final instant, like Rossellini's Socrates, Charles still yearns to speak: "I imagined that my thoughts would be sublime at this moment, but—" The same applies to Bresson; making this expression of his despair, he demonstrates that it is not quite absolute.

The last shot of *The Devil Probably* holds its contradictions—the "logical" case for suicide, the "illogical" impulse to continue living anyway—in precarious balance. After Charles dies, the camera watches Valentine first walk, then jog away into the background, along a path barely visible against the night. Once again, there is no trace of transcendental feeling; the image conjures up Guine-

vere's "dark void." Yet the shift from Charles to Valentine is revealing. Sick and gaunt, Valentine (Nicholas Deguy) is a negative image of the other characters, a wretched zombie who scorns charity and cares for nothing but his next score of smack. Yet he, too, wants to live, even if it's illogical. Earlier, in the most flamboyant effect of his career, Bresson begins the Monteverdi choral music which Charles plays in the cathedral over a preceding image of a syringe filling with Valentine's blood during a heroin injection. Our minds leap back to this astonishing shot as the camera watches him vanish, then holds on the empty path before fading out silently. Bresson pays tribute, finally, to the tenacity of the life force in a parched, attenuated world, yet how bitter a tribute. And how sad if *The Devil Probably* proves to be his last film.

FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER—The Kingdom by the Seine

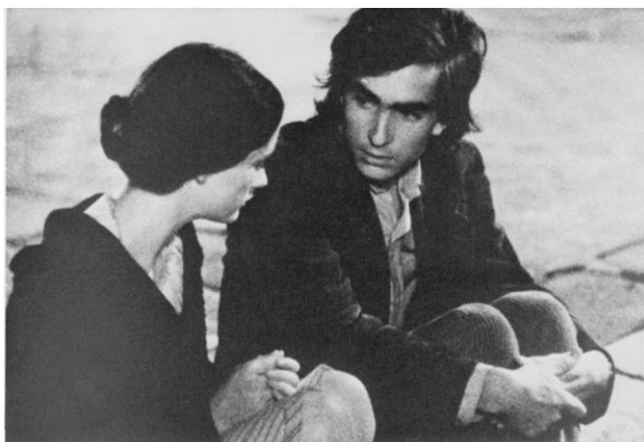
Yet his age and the mounting difficulty of funding even the most commercial projects, let alone his kind, make this dire possibility more and more likely. So I wish that somehow chronology could be rearranged to make *Four Nights of a Dreamer* his newest film instead. When it first appeared, Carlos Clarens wrote prophetically: "Because it is noticeably less stark and sombre than any Bresson picture to date, *Four Nights of a Dreamer* is headed for a low place in the director's canon."¹⁰ But, after the renewed desolation of its two successors, it may have more to show us today than was apparent in 1971—a good reason to place it out of sequence here.

None of this makes *Four Nights* exuberant even by Bresson's standards; it, too, dwells on isolation and despair. But, unlike its companion films, it also has not merely moments but long passages of weird, soaring elation. Again, Bresson transposes Dostoyevsky to modern Paris ("White Nights," in this case). Jacques (Guillaume des Forets), a reclusive young painter, labors in his loft over semi-abstract, cool-hued canvasses and recites into a tape recorder variations on a reverie of "pure and innocent" love in a medieval setting. When he goes outside, he often trails and watches strange women without trying to pick them up. When he finds Marthe (Isabelle Weingarten) poised

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to jump from the Pont Neuf one night and coaxes her off the parapet, it is as though his medieval fantasy has unexpectedly come to life. When Marthe tells him that she was contemplating suicide because a lover has failed to return to her, as promised, after completing a term at Yale, Jacques (one might say “chivalrously”) tries to sustain her fading hope, while yearning to replace the other man in her heart. However, their four nights of rendezvous by the bridge end when the other man finally does return and Marthe abruptly abandons Jacques. Knowing recent Bresson, we expect him to take her place on the Pont Neuf, even if we also know that “White Nights” ends in a burst of irrational joy. But Bresson follows Dostoyevsky; Jacques remains alive—returning to his painting, thanking Marthe into his tape recorder for the love and happiness she brought him, even so briefly, during these “luminous, marvellous nights.”

Unlike *Une Femme Douce* and *The Devil Probably*, *Four Nights of a Dreamer* uses a time-shifting structure *without* predestining its characters by revealing their fates in advance. Bresson has also lightened Dostoyevsky's material with odd, frequently awkward comic touches. Jacques is his looniest hero, and our introduction to him is downright wacky. After a pre-titles shot of him hitch-hiking in Paris, we pick him up traipsing through a field, looking resigned to the necessity of communing with nature but plainly having no idea how to do it. So, with stoic determination, he turns two somersaults. It is a “Huh?” moment; we wonder if we are supposed to laugh, until we see some people nearby also going “Huh?” Later, gleeful with hope for a Great Love with Marthe, he tapes cooing pigeons and his own chants of “Marthe,” playing the chants everywhere he goes (oblivious to gawkers); then, to his amazement, he starts seeing her name all over the city—in a store window, on a cargo barge. Bresson makes him a giddy Pierrot beneath his dead pan; if it were raining and this were a different movie, he would be singin' in it. Bresson seems to have caught his own whiff of this ether; witness his use of a trip to the movies by Marthe and her mother to stage a nutty *film noir* send-up, complete with gats, George Raft suits, Max Steiner crescendoes, and a perforated gungel gazing soulfully at a picture of his



FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER

moll before croaking his last. Of course, this parodies the Grand Passion that Jacques and Marthe seek. But what makes it elusively touching is the very “inappropriateness” of Bresson's style when it confronts the “forbidden” in yet another form—in this case, a spoof which Blake Edwards could have tossed off with ten times his expertise.

But Marthe's story has an eerie erotic expressiveness far surpassing anything else Bresson has done. She becomes fixated on the newest lodger in the apartment which she shares with her mother, yet she fearfully avoids meeting or even seeing him. Then, alone in her bedroom one night listening to music, Marthe becomes so turbulent with free-floating emotional and sexual longing that she suddenly removes her nightgown and begins to preen languidly before a full-length mirror. Bresson films her semi-abstractly, like living sculpture: framing her from the neck down as she slumberously sways and turns, then intercutting her taut, now sensually alive face and loosened, silken hair with her slowly flexing legs, as her absorption in her feelings and her desire-permeated flesh increases. Afterwards, when she has turned the music off, we hear sounds from the lodger's neighboring room, and Bresson cuts to a shot of his hand rapping on the wall. It is as though their mutual yearning had telepathically mingled through the walls which separate them physically; Marthe feels this so strongly that she covers herself even though she is still alone. The following day, after she goes into the lodger's room, Bresson places them in a standing nude embrace as they hide silently from her mother, who, paranoid about male treachery, prowls and calls for Marthe. Bresson's austerity flowers in a wondrous new way during these frankly

sexual scenes. "I believe in the value of concentration in this respect as in any other," he told Clarens,¹⁰ but the enrichment flows both ways. Capturing both the blocked surge of sensual desire and its fragile fulfillment, he makes erotic attraction play virtually the same role here that religious grace plays in earlier films: an *unwilled, unbidden* transfiguration which binds and frees simultaneously. As Jacques proposes telling the lodger in a letter he offers to deliver: "She cannot defend herself against her love for you."

Nor can Jacques defend himself against his own love for Marthe. He tries to live out the fantasy of saving, comforting, and finally winning the adoration of a lovely, mysterious woman. Though fully aware of this perversity, Bresson celebrates the feelings which begin to flow between the two self-absorbed dreamers. Without abandoning his visual precision, he surrenders along with them to the beauty of the Parisian evenings. The iridescence of the life around the bridge recalls the nighttown of *American Graffiti*, and the arrival there of a glowing *bateau mouche* creates as stunning an effect as the landing of the alien spaceship in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Cutting inside the boat to a velvety seductive Latin band as rainbow colors shimmer, liquid yet ghostly, through the boat's glass canopy and off the river, highlighting the hippie-troubadours who strum along the quais, reflecting the whole enchantment off the faces of Marthe and Jacques, Bresson suggests that the ecstatic tenderness which they want is *not* a mere illusion. No film has ever conjured up a more bewitching vision of rapture.

However, Bresson also points up the cruelty of romantic obsession. As Marthe and Jacques exchange intimate details of their lives, we expect them to drop their misty dreams and fall in love with each other. But Marthe keeps on using the word "love" carelessly, when she means devotion or affection: telling Jacques that she "loves" him because he is not "in love" with her or that he fears the lodger's return lest it reveal this "love" of theirs. She completely misunderstands Jacques's emotions; genuine love for her has overwhelmed him, unwilled, unbidden, just as genuine love for the lodger overwhelmed her in the same way. But, regardless of his wish to do so, Jacques simply cannot arouse in Marthe the same desire that she

arouses in him and the lodger arouses in her; such desire, like religious grace, is "the wind (that) blows where it will." Bresson subtly underscores their confusion by sharply separating the parts of his narrative from one another with titles like *Histoire de Marthe*, *Histoire de Jacques*, *Première Nuit*—suggesting that, like the stories and the nights, the dreamers will be unable to merge.

Yet they do try, in a way unique to Bresson's films. When, despite her letter, the lodger still fails to appear, Marthe curses him bitterly and hides in the darkness along the river; her romantic dream now looks hollow and ridiculous. Jacques's hesitant approach pushes her into a fury of lamentation which makes him walk away, profoundly depressed. Grasping his true feelings at last, she stops her self-pitying outcries and goes after him. Then comes another of those Bressonian moments which evoke complex emotional interchanges through the simple eloquence of two people touching one another. When Marthe catches up, Jacques calmly opens her cloak, tells her quietly of his love, then embraces and caresses her. After an instant's hesitation, she folds her arm acceptingly around his neck—a muted echo of her nude embrace with the lodger. What makes these gestures, this muted echo, so significant in terms of Bresson's "theology" is that they signal the *refusal* of Marthe and Jacques to submit to "predestined" fates—in this instance, her obsession with the lodger and his inability to evoke the same obsessions with himself from her. Moments later, sitting in a café with Jacques, she sums up this conflict between "unbidden" love and "chosen" love: what she feels for the lodger will fade because she did not choose to feel it, but her new feelings for Jacques will last because she *decided* to feel them. By this point, Bresson's hypnotic depiction of the four nights has induced us to agree; we could happily see the film end now, with each telling the other of the strange roads which have led them to one another.

But this "chosen" love is another fantasy, and Bresson's direction of the next moments destroys it breathtakingly. As Jacques and Marthe leave the café, newly pledged to each other, he renews our pleasure in the nightlife around the Pont Neuf with additional exquisite images: Jacques wrapping a red-and-white gift scarf around Marthe's neck, a candle burning on a street musician's

guitar case. Just as we see the candle, Marthe is telling Jacques to come live in the lodger's old room, and he is gazing up at the moon. But she is looking levelly at something else: the lodger approaching through the crowd of night people. He sees her, calls to her. Then, with shocking swiftness: she rushes to him, Jacques looks down to see her reach him, she kisses him, she runs back to kiss Jacques three times, she vanishes with the lodger, Jacques watches. Bresson has never directed a crueller, more piercing moment of disillusionment than this.

Yet he implicitly accepts Dostoyevsky's fervent, contradictory concluding lines: "Good Lord, only a moment of bliss? Isn't such a moment sufficient for the whole of a man's life?" Instead of quoting these lines, Bresson permits us to notice the reflection of the "luminous, marvellous nights" in the colors of Jacques's paintings. "Call it a happy ending if you wish," Clarens writes.¹⁰ I do, and I will.

But, as we have seen, Bresson moved on to darker endings. *The Devil Probably*, in fact, almost extinguishes several of the most poetic motifs in *Four Nights of a Dreamer*: the *bateau mouche*, the hippie life along the Seine, the embraces. Will Bresson's art, craft, and reflections, cultivated so mandarinly and so heroically these many years, end here, as Pasolini's did? Had Pasolini not been

murdered after completing *Salò*, he might have fallen into creative sterility, unless he could have found a way not to deny but to transcend his despair. So it may be with Bresson. I think of Alfred Hitchcock saying that his love for film was stronger than any morality and hope that Robert Bresson's, even now, remains stronger than any despair.

NOTES

1. Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*. Gallimard, 1975. (English translation: *Notes on Cinematography*. Tr. by Jonathan Griffin, Urizen Books, 1977)
2. Marvin Zeman, "The Suicide of Robert Bresson," *Cinema* (Beverly Hills), Vol. 6, #3.
3. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. University of California Press, 1972.
4. Paul Schrader, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview), *Film Comment*, September-October, 1977
5. Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder, *Self and Cinema: A Transformalist Perspective*. Redgrave Publishing Company, 1980.
6. Charles Thomas Samuels, "Robert Bresson" (interview), in *Encountering Directors*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972.
7. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac*," *Sight & Sound*, Summer 1974.
8. François Truffaut, "Vive Robert Bresson," printed statement distributed during Filmex 1978.
9. Jonathan Cott, "Fires Within: The Chaste Sensuality of Director Louis Malle" (interview), *Rolling Stone*, April 6, 1978.
10. Carlos Clarens, "Four Nights of a Dreamer," *Sight & Sound*, Winter 1971-72.

MICHAEL KLEIN

Truffaut's Sanctuary: The Green Room

Shortly after I wrote this article my mother had a stroke, and after a long period of suffering—paralysis, blindness, inability to speak and, gradually, the onset of a kind of madness—died. She died leaving nothing, nothing tangible except a few photographs. After her death I lit a candle in memoriam, not out of any kind of orthodoxy, but because it seemed to keep her memory alive in the

room, to bring back memories of the past. And then, at first dimly, I recognized the correspondence with James's story and Truffaut's film: the candle in the fireplace was an altar to the dead, not unlike Julien Davenne's construction in *The Green Room*, and for similar reasons: it was an attempt to maintain a sense of continuity and thus meaning between past and present in the midst